

## Odyssey of Sita: A Feminist Revision of Mythology with Special Reference to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Forest of Enchantments*

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### Abstract

*Hindu mythology with its rich cultural heritage stands out in the global tapestry of mythology. These ancient texts provide a myriad wealth of knowledge and a deep insight into the belief, values & tradition that have shaped Hindu civilization over millennia. In contemporary India there is rapid resurgence in rewriting Indian mythology adding fresh perspective to it. Writing from females' perspective is stand out among such retelling bringing the agonies and pain of often ignored mythical women from periphery to forefront. Present paper aims to explore the saga of Sita with special focus to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *the Forest of Enchantments*, retelling of Ramayana. Which acquaints us with the sufferings of women along with Sita, who is worshipped for her devotion and unyielding trust towards her husband.*

**Keywords:** Hindu mythology, Feminist revision, Contemporary literature, Myth, Mythical symbolism, Retelling, Culture.

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### Introduction

Myths are mini narratives, deeply rooted in the belief, value, cultural and societal norms of the culture from which they originate. These narratives find their origin in the ancient texts & folklore of related religion or culture. And sometimes these old tales are orally transmitted from generation to generation. In ancient Greek philosophy myths are described as mythos and logic as logos. Myth gave rise to oracle & art whereas from logos came the science. Science always provided the answer to how but to get the answer of why, people took the help of mythos. 'If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea'' says Devdutt Pattanaik. According to him "from myth comes belief, from mythology customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings, mythology influences behaviours". Mythology serves as a model for human behaviours and a medium of expression for transferring moral lesson & belief to a cultural

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group. This existed even before the evolution of language when people used to communicate via bodily expressions and carving pictures on stones & caves so that they could transfer their belief system, rituals, cultural values to the coming generations. Every country has its own mythology and almost every mythology have its own model heroes, symbols, rituals & and the notion of right and wrong as its central theme. For example, in Greek mythology we have legends like Hercules, Prometheus & Zeus and the concept of heaven & hell and in Hindu mythology we have the triumvirate of lord Brahma, Vishnu & Mahesh (Shiva) They embodies the cosmic order of creation, sustenance, and destruction as a triad of deities. Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver, and Shiva is the destroyer.

Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individual and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular. Ideas such as rebirth, heaven and hell, angels and demons, fate and freewill, sin, Satan and salvation are religious myth. Ideas such as sovereignty, nation state, human rights, and gay rights are secular myths. Religious or secular, all myths make profound sense to one group of people. Not to everyone. They cannot be rationalized beyond a point. In the final analysis, you either accept them or you don't. (Devdutt Pattanaik, xvi)

### **Hindu Mythology**

Hindu mythology with its rich cultural heritage which comprises four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sam, Atharva,), Up Vedas, Upanishad & two epic Ramayana & Mahabharat, stands out in global tapestry of mythology. These ancient texts provide a myriad wealth of knowledge and a deep insight into the belief, values & tradition that have shaped Hindu civilization over millennia. India is one of the oldest surviving civilizations in the world. The art, literature, religious lessons & philosophies of this country are strongly linked and integrated into its culture, psychology and education system. Specifically, stories from Indian mythology represents country's belief system, cultural construct and socio-cultural understanding that binds its people together. The mythology is an integral part of a religion, both religion and stories from mythology impact the socio – cultural behaviours of a particular group of people. Stories from mythology have always been the source of inspiration and a medium of education in Indian society. Great epics like Ramayana & Mahabharata are the major source of such stories. These two revered epics have been the profound source of wisdom, inspiration & offered deep insights into the mysteries of life and the afterlife since the time immemorial. Ramayana along with the longest written epic Mahabharata is the storehouse of countless mini narratives. The

Ramayana have more than 300 versions in different languages like Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, Assamese, Oriya, Kashmiri, Telugu, Hindi and many more. These numbers are only for written version there are various television adaptations captivating the hearts and minds of audience.

### **Revisiting, Rewriting & Reimagining Hindu Mythology in Postmodern Literature**

Myths have always been modified, retold by various philosophical schools over time, and are taken to have deeper often symbolic meaning. Though the relevance and truthfulness of mythological tales have always been questioned. J.R.R. Tolkien's poem "Mythopoeia" claims how even C.S. Lewis described myths as "lies and therefore worthless". But there is always an urge to listen and unfold the multiple layers of symbols in mythological tales. These tales from revered epic like Mahabharata & Ramayana to their television adaptation and from modern retellings captivating youth to cartoon and anime adaptation of Chhota Bheem, Bal Hanuman & The Legends of Hanuman are timeless and remain deeply entrenched in Hindu society, enduringly popular and relevant across generations. These tales not only entertain the audience but also serve as cultural touchstone and continue to educate, inspire & guide with a rich tapestry of tradition that binds and enriches the collective consciousness of Hindu Society. Mythology have become the popular genre in both literature and television serial. The sacred stories have been retold multiple times, where the source and main plot remain the same but with different approach. As Amish Tripathi has stated in his interview to The Hindu "Myths are not about the stories but about the message you spread through them. And as societies and beliefs change, myths have to change along with them. Modernising and localising myths are ways of keeping them relevant in modern times". In contemporary Indian English literature there is resurgence in retelling mythological stories. Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan, Devdutt Pattanaik and Kavita Kane, are the authors whose entire work is based on mythology. Along with them the other authors of this genre are retelling the narrative from the perspective of marginalised or misunderstood characters with different approaches. Amish Tripathi created new style of storytelling by combining history, myth and science. In his famous Shiva Trilogy, Shiva is a human being with flesh and blood who, through his actions, elevates himself to the status of a godlike savior. He is depicted as a powerful, moral man whose conflict and attempt to build an egalitarian society have made him eternal. Anand Neelakantan chose to unveil the story from the point of view of anti – hero. In the pages of history only the version of victors has always been told. The voice of the vanquished remains lost in silence. What if they have their own version of story to tell? His Ravan in Asura; The tale of the Vanquished and

Duryodhana in Ajaya sequence aims to share the reason behind their deeds. Kavita Kane is considered as a revolutionary force in Indian writing, using feminist perspective in Hindu mythology. She chose to retell the mythology from the perspective of unsung female characters. Her novels *Karna's Wife*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess*, *The Fisher Queen Dynasty*, *Ahalya's Awakening & Saraswati's Gift* gave voice to the characters like Uruvi, Urmila, Menka, Surpankha, Satyavati, Ahalya & Goddess Saraswati. The female mythological characters portrayed in her novels are resilient, courageous, unconventional, bold & incandescent, who raise their voice against the subjugation inflicted upon them by patriarchal society. Devdutt Pattanaik, a well-versed author of Indian mythology, with a rich legacy of over 50 books provides a deep insight and logical interpretation of Indian culture, Gods & Goddesses. In his book *Myth = Mithya* he dives deep to decode the complex symbolism of Hindu mythology and explain the reason behind rituals. In another book *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols, and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*, he explores difference between science and myth. By reinterpreting myths from revered epics and folklores, Devdutt explores the mysterious nature of humans. He clarifies and elucidates on the root cause of traditions and taboo practices in India even today. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusion* retold the events of Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi in first person narration. In her novel she discussed her marital issue, suffering, humiliation & subjugation in male dominated society, and traces out the reason behind her desire of revenge against Kauravas. Divakaruni's Draupadi is intelligent, outspoken, shrewd, brave and an able statesman, who after the bloodshed of Kurukshetra, saves the widowed wives of soldiers and establishes trades business for their livelihood. Though the stereotypical roles have always been inflicted upon her by society right after her birth from denying getting the education of warcraft and politics to forcing her into polyandrous marriage "Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (120). But she always remained resilient, breaking all the shackles of patriarchy. Apart from these notable authors, many others like Arisha Sattar, Usha Narayanan, Sharath Komarraju, Krishna Udaya Sankar, Preeti Vyas, Anu Kumar & Sanjay Patel are significantly contributing to keep Indian mythology alive and relevant for contemporary society.

### **Various Versions of The Epic Ramayana on Literary Horizon**

Among many perspectives of mythological revision of The Ramayana, feminist perspective is the one that is growing rapidly on literary horizon. Though women have given importance as equal to men in Hindu mythology. The Devi Shuka hymn of Rigveda declares feminine energy

as the essence of the universe. But still the presence & importance of women were overshadowed by the male figures of mythology. Chitra Banerjee in her novel *The Palace of Illusion* says:

I was left unsatisfied by the portrayals of women in the epic. It was not as though the epic did not have powerful complex women characters that affected the action in major ways...But in some way they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. (xv)

The Ramayana is the story of king Ram's adventurous & heroic journey, but there are many women in the epic who played crucial roles yet remained overshadowed and unsung. Though there are male authors who re-narrated the story from female point of view, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik is an evident of it. But while he provides modern interpretation within the traditional framework, feminist retellings by women often delve deeper into gender dynamics, societal structures, and the lived experiences of female characters. Navneeta Dev Sen in her article *When Women Retell the Ramayana*, says- "When women retell the Ramayana, Sita is the name they give themselves: the homeless female, the foundling, unloved, rejected and unsecure". (27) Female authors who undertake such retellings often delve into the inner feelings and struggles of characters like Sita, Urmila, Kaikeyi, Ahalya, Mandodari, Surpanakha, and many others. Through their narratives, they highlight the plight of these women, shedding light on their desires, agency, and resilience in the face of societal expectations and patriarchal structures.

Bengali Ramayana of Chandravati (late 16th century) is one of the earliest rewritings from feminist perspective in which Sita has brighter character than Ram. Sita, the incarnation of Goddess, in her retelling is transformed into the representative of Indian women & Ram like an ordinary jealous husband has been severely criticised for his deeds. But eventually her version of Ramayana was rejected on the pretext of being incomplete text. Malika Sengupta's *Sitayan* (1996), based on Uttara Kand is more radical in critiquing Ram. The story begins after Lakshman leaves pregnant Sita alone in the wilderness of forest on the order of his elder brother Ram. Though the storyline doesn't deviate from Valmiki's original version, but Sengupta makes her Sita take stand for herself and raise her voice against the injustice done with Shudras and refuses to tolerate the harassment of Surpankha at the hand of Lakshman. She burst out in anger when she was forced to prove her chastity time and again and questioned "Before whom will I take the oath . . . Before that lord who had secretly deserted his pregnant wife?... if a

women ask for justice on these grounds from a king who is famed worldwide for his wisdom, will Rama be worthy to sit on the throne of that judge?" (221). Her Kaushalya is another voice of dissent who disapprove the polyandry of her husband and chastises Ram for the injustices he inflicted upon Sita. Sengupta moves one step ahead and create the character of Shudra woman Mitra the wife of Shambuka, through her character she pictures the double marginalised life of lower caste woman. Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* is a collection of five short stories with Sita its central protagonist. Story begins when Sita embarks on her journey to self-realisation after the abandonment by Purushottam Ram. In her ventures she either crosses path with the other women like Surpankha, Renuka, Urmila and Ahalya or remembers the advice given by them in past, which influences her action and shapes her journey. She learns about diverse issued faced by women in patriarchal society with each women's experiences be it conventional beauty standard, objectification of women and the redundancy of war through Surpankha; touching upon the issue like rape, infidelity and the credibility of a woman through Ahalya's advice; questioning the institution of patriarchal marriage, religion, caste through Renuka and the power of self-authority through the conversation with her sister Urmila. The shared experiences of other brilliant women enable Sita to accept the past gracefully and embrace her newfound meaning of life which led her to final liberation from the rigid shackles of patriarchy. Volga not only break the notion of stereotypical character of Sita a damsel in distress but also empower the other strong yet unsung females' character by giving them persistent voice.

The thread of these saga of women by women doesn't end here, there are many outstanding retellings of Ramayana in the history of mythological retelling. When they retell the epic Sita and other woman becomes their mouthpiece, which give them opportunity to lament in the sorrows and plight faced by mythological women and to show the society that no matter how miserable their lives were, they faced all the difficulty with bravery, grace and resilient.

### **Echoes of Myth from The Literary Canvas of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Forest of Enchantments***

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is world famous Indian born American author and poet. Her works focuses on women's experiences & challenges of living in both Indian society and in foreign country as an immigrant. Through her works she offers a unique perspective, bringing women to the centre of the narrative from periphery. She was born on 29 July 1956 in Kolkata, India. After graduating from the University of Calcutta in 1976 she moved to United States.

Divakaruni owns a rich legacy of works with diverse themes which includes *The Mistress of Spices* (1995), *Sister of my Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusion* (2008), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) *The Last Queen* (2021), *Independence* (2023). Well known for her works those dig deep into the topics like immigration, ethnic identity, history and many issues faced by women, she recrafted the old stories of Hindu mythology with fresh perspective. Present paper aims to explore the resilient voice of strong female mythological characters Sita portrayed by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, with relevance to contemporary India. Her novels *The Palace of Illusion* and *The Forest of Enchantments* the retellings of Mahabharata & Ramayana respectively, offers an insight into the psychological experiences of women in patriarchal society by putting Draupadi and Sita at the centre of the narrative. Instead of adhering to the traditional roles of mythical characters, she infuses new perspectives to traditional tales and bring forth the agony of women. The women of ancient India were always brave, resilient, headstrong and empowered, but unfortunately their journey was least focused in epics and ancient texts. Time passed and legend became stereotypes. These kinds of revisit of mythology offers an opportunity to unveil the multiple layers of such characters and to understand the phenomena with fresh perspective contradictory to the traditional one. In Indian society we grew up listening stories from Ramayana and we have watched the amount of respect in people for Sita as an ideal wife, who followed her husband on every difficult path of life. But she was misunderstood as a submissive woman with no choices of her own. Divakaruni in her novel *The Forest of Enchantment* says-

As I send *The Forest of Enchantments* out into the world, I ask for the benediction of Sita, goddess, daughter, sister, lover, warrior, mother – and a role model for women all over the world. I pray that the novel lodge deep in the hearts of readers regardless of their gender; for Sita’s story has much in to inspire and console us all. And, finally, I hope that it brings new meaning to that old blessing: May you be like Sita. (Author’s note (ix, x))

Divakaruni’s Sita follows her husband Ram during his banishment not merely for the sake of wifely duty but because of the bond of love that both share with each other. Unlike other feminist retellings of the epic Divakaruni doesn’t criticise Ram to the extreme of hatred. But rather she portrayed him as a complex persona, though noble and ideal in nature and devoted to his wife but caught up in between the roles of an ideal king and as a husband. Through the perspective of Sita, she unfolds the multiple layers of Purushottam Ram’s personality along with her own story. We see that the problems of contemporary society aren’t much different to the problems in ancient times such as love, betrayal, gender inequality and struggle faced by

women. Such retellings bring forth the agony of women to the forefront and set the examples of courageous female characters who, despite of societal constraints, retains their agency and remained resilient at the face of adversity. The relevance of various retellings is evident watching their popularity among youth, these narratives captivating the hearts of readers by entertaining and keeping the words of wisdom from ancient times alive in their mind.

### **Sita's Path of Autonomy, Strength & Independence**

*The Forest of Enchantments* is the retelling of *Ramayana* from the perspective of Sita, wife of King Ram. This novel narrates the journey of Sita, tracing out her agonies, pain, sufferings and abandonment and how she remained empowered and resilient at the face of adversity with autonomy. Divakaruni's Sita is not passive and silent sufferer but a strong woman who takes control of her life and makes choices of her own, asks questions, takes stand for herself and for other women as well. She faced twice abandonment, firstly by her biological parents and secondly by her husband whom she loved the most. Various sufferings were inflicted upon her but she never lost her sense of autonomy & strength, despite all unfavourable situations she didn't stop making independent choice right from the beginning as princess in Mithila to queen of Ayodhya, from a healer in forest to a captive in Lanka. During her second exile, when sage Valmiki gave his manuscript of *Ramayana* her to read. She praises his sublime creation but didn't cease to question him for not mentioning her side of the story and says "what occurred when I was alone in the darkness, under the sorrow tree, you don't know. You don't know my despair. You don't know my exhilaration, how I felt – first in the forest then in Ayodhya". (2) Earlier in the epics the feelings and desires of Sita weren't much focused like how she felt during her Swayam Wara arranged by her father, during her exile, her days in Ashoka vatika & when she was abandoned by her husband. Divakaruni's Sita acknowledges her inner desire, expresses her feelings and speaks fiercely to herself whenever it is required. Her decision to follow her husband Ram in exile was not merely the act of obedience but an independent choice to accompany her partner during all ups and downs. She shattered the stereotypical notion of women being sensitive to hardship, by abandoning the luxury of palace and accepting a harsh life of forest. An epitome of strength, Sita, creates a castle of comfort even in the wilderness of thick forest. Her autonomy and strength can be seen during her captivity in Lanka, she not only showed physical endurance, but strong mind set which enabled her to be resilient against all humiliation and torture. She refused to succumbed to Ravana's trickery and temptations, and remained faithful to her beloved husband Ram. After the battle when Purushottam Ram asks

her to prove her chastity for sake of his subjects, shocked Sita try to reason with him but all in vain.

Then, in the dark hopelessness of my heart, a thought flashed like fire. Abandoned as I was by my husband, no one could save me. But I could save myself. Love and happiness might not be in my control, but at least my dignity still remained mine. I might not be able to have the life I wanted, but I could choose the manner of my death. (245)

During her second exile in the serene environment of Valmiki's ashram she raises her kids all alone and ventures on the journey to self-exploration. Sita though the incarnation of Goddess, could never escape from the misery of life like any other Indian woman living in patriarchal society. But her choices to thrive, being resilient & strong makes the whole difference. When she was demanded another Agni Pariksha to prove her innocence in front of everyone she said – "I must reject your kind offer to allow me to prove my innocence again. Because this is one of those times when a woman must stand up and say, no more!" (357). Her decision of returning back to the earth is symbolises her liberation from the shackles of patriarchy, she proves her chastity twice but refuses to stay in this metaphorical captivity and returns to her original abode after teaching a lesson of autonomy, courage, strength and resilient to the future generations.

### **Sita, A Pinnacle of Modern Women**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Sita speaks for modern woman, emphasizing that many of the problems and challenges women face have remained consistent over time. She perfectly knows her role of a daughter, sister, wife & queen but along with this she never forgets her individuality. We witness the concept of universal sisterhood in *The Forest of Enchantments* through the relationship that Sita forges with other women in her life, transcending boundaries of class, race & species. In the very beginning of the novel when sage Valmiki asks her to write her own story, she heard an echo of all women like kaikeyi, Ahalya, Mandodari, Urmila, and Surpankha, who remained unheard. "Write our story, too. For always we've been pushed into corners trivialized, misunderstood, blamed, forgotten- or maligned and used as cautionary tales". (4) Further we see this bond during her captivity in Lanka where Trijata the chief guard and Sarama, wife of Vibhishan became her sole source of support and comfort. She even felt the pain of Surpankha for the rejection and insult she get from everyone. Such bonds highlight the shared experiences of pain, struggle and sufferings which strengthen relationship of women so that they can stand together supporting each other. During her second exile she gave birth to twins Lava & Kusha and raised them alone in the forest without a father and luxuries of

palace. She takes the role of both mother and father, teaching them the skill they need to survive. She not only focuses on physical skills but also pays attention on imparting moral and ethical values so that they can be both courageous and honourable. Before returning to earth, she gives her kids the lesson of balancing love with duty so that they don't repeat the mistakes that their grandfather and father committed. Her ability to nurture her kids mirrors and inspires the single mother who try to balance career, personal aspiration and motherhood, often under not so favourable circumstances. Sita, though ideal and traditional in conduct never hesitate from revolting against unnecessary dominance. Having proved her chastity once by fire test, when asked for another, she burst out in anger-

Rage rises up in me until my whole body is scorched, for some kinds of burning don't require a fire. Not a word of love, not a word of apology for the sorrow he has caused me. Not a word about the unjust and cruel way in which he sent me away. He hasn't even called me by my name. (355)

Sita embodies good leadership quality and she was well aware about how any action or behaviour of leader impacts and alter the behaviours of other people. She tried to reason that upcoming generation will use King Ram's action to justify their decision on small mistakes of women that will only worsen their condition. "Society will use my action forever after to judge other women. Even when they aren't guilty... And society will say, why not? Even Queen Sita went through it. (357) Sita, an incarnation of Goddess endures all the injustices inflicted upon her with grace and emerges victorious setting an example of strength and autonomy for modern women. She changed the whole concept of enduring, according to her it is not being weak or accepting injustice silently but to take the challenges with courage and fight against all the odds.

## **Conclusion**

Divakaruni's Sita chose the path of autonomy and resilience rather than being a silent sufferer enduring every hardship of life. She made choices of her own from choosing Ram as her husband to following him in the forest, from being a single mother to the decision of returning to her original abode earth. She acts like a pinnacle for modern women by taking stand for herself and other women in her life establishing the very notion of universal sisterhood in order to thrive in the patriarchal society. She undoubtedly is the representative of the modern era holding traditional as well modern virtues to award femininity in its truest sense. These kind of retelling from fresh perspective are relevant in contemporary society because such retellings provide modern women the required strength to survive in this world. We always knew Sita as

an ideal wife and a passive sufferer but Divakaruni's Sita breaks all the boundaries and sets an example of resilient woman. She emerges out as a healer, a true companion who shares not only happiness but ready to share hardships of her mate's life, a compassionate mother who raises her kids to be courageous and honourable at the same time, a woman who is personification to dauntless courage and magnanimous feminine endeavour did not submit to any destined misfortune which came her way rather fought ferociously with every odd. Now I would like to sum up with most fascinating quote by Rabindranath Tagore:

Woman should use her power to break through the surface and go to the centre of things, where in the mystery of life dwells an eternal source of interest. Man has not this power to such an extent. But woman has it, if she does not kill it, - and therefore she loves the creature who are not lovable for their uncommon qualities. Man has to do his duty in a world of his own where he is always creating power and wealth and organisation of different kinds. But God has sent woman to love the world, which is world of ordinary things and events. (414)

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